

CT Education Committee

Support: SB 1096

An Act Concerning the Charter School Approval Process

March 1, 2023

Greetings Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, and Members of the Education Committee,

It is no secret Connecticut has one of the largest income and achievement gaps in the country. Varick AME Memorial Zion Church believes that by investing in our children's education, we inherently make a significant investment in our state's future. We know our elected leaders are facing tough decisions about how to best appropriate funds. We just ask that you recognize our children's education as a high priority while doing so. Investments in students that attend all schools of choice, such as magnet schools and charter schools, are an investment in the future of Connecticut. Research proves that students thrive when they have access to options that fit their learning styles best.

While Varick believes it is necessary to provide parents with a robust set of choices for magnet and charter schools, we find that many choice conversations sadly often end up divisive. We should direct our conversations toward making sure all children have great opportunities and ultimately educational success. It is unacceptable that all Connecticut public schools are underfunded, especially charter schools. Additionally, it is unacceptable that while there is demonstrated demand in our communities for increased educational opportunities, schools that are approved to open are being delayed due to a broken process. Schools like the Danbury Charter School and Norwalk Excellence, which were approved in 2018 and have been unable to open due to Connecticut's existing authorization process.

Over 85% of public charter school students are students of color and nearly 65% are low-income. How can we tell families that poverty isn't destiny and they can achieve the American Dream if we cannot even provide adequate funding for their child's education? What message are we sending to the families of New Haven and others across Connecticut who need the most help when we continually tell them to make do with less, time and time again? What message are we sending when we see the demand in our communities for more high-quality educational options yet continue to deny these opportunities to families?

Our hope is that you make the best decisions for our children. By large, I support S.B. 1096. This legislation approaches a solution to reverse the negative impacts caused by legislation implemented in the 2015 session. Under this raised bill, the State Department of Education will have the ability to grant a charter to a new public charter school. Current law has created an obstructive system that makes it extremely difficult for an approved school to receive authorization.

The current process we are speaking about today involves coordination with 3 different entities and multiple steps stalling the process. The total timeline for a charter school to be approved from the RFP announcement to a school formal opening was historically 2 years prior to the current change. We are now on year 5 for the 2 schools stuck in this process.

Additionally, this legislation creates a non-lapsing account in the General Fund that will sanction SDE to fund charters approved by the State Board of Education known as the charter school approval grant account. These funds will be expended upon the granting of a charter in a fair and appropriate timeline through legislative budgetary power, maintaining legislative oversight, and upholding the democratic process many fear would be lost.

We believe every child in a charter school should have an opportunity to continue learning in their school and every public charter school should receive adequate funding to educate those students. The thousands of children currently on charter school waitlists in our state should not have to keep waiting when there are approved schools ready and willing to open in their community.

We ask that you do the right thing by creating a system that allows for increased access to high-quality public school options for Connecticut children.

Sincerely,

Rev. Kelcy Steele

Pastor

Varick AME Zion Church

Board Chair

Booker T. Washington Academy